CULTURE & MEDIA

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Dildoshops, Gritty, and Bernie's Mittens: The Framing of American Politics Through Pop Cultural Memes

Abstract. An unprecedented number of memes emerged in response to the 2020 U.S. presidential elections. This article offers a thematic analysis of a corpus of memes published on *Twitter* between November 3, 2020 and January 20, 2021 in relation to the U.S. presidential election. By further employing a qualitative discourse analysis and close readings of selected examples, this article explores the stances and intertextual references expressed in the memetic discourse. I illustrate which events users engage with, how they frame them using the elements of American pop culture, and the different functions such memes served for different publics. Central events – such as Donald Trump's press conference in a Four Seasons Total Landscaping parking lot, Joe Biden's victory and rumors about the Russian president Putin resigning – were commented upon both with broad references to widely popular franchises such as *Star Wars* and with multi-layered intertextual references to iconography of meme culture such as the Hockey mascot Gritty. Memes exaggerated events for comedic purposes, providing relief after a long time of tension, as well as possibly trivializing and distorting public perception of events. While meme activity peaked on November 6th and 7th, a singular viral meme of Bernie Sanders emerged after Joe Biden's inauguration, illustrating a different genre of meme as a response to a different political situation in which the political figure serves a wide variety of purposes in commenting upon popular culture. Such memes served to establish a sense of community, agency, and catharsis after the anxieties many Democratic voters experienced prior to the election. These findings present the growing role of popular and fan culture to political discourse on mainstream social media platforms and their varied and highly flexible expression.

Keywords: Memes, Twitter, popular culture, fandom, American politics, elections

1. Introduction

Amid the political turmoil of 2020, those following the U.S. elections on social media might have come across some strange figures playing central roles: From garden center parking lots next to adult stores to hairy orange monsters and hand-knit mittens gifted to a politician (Satenstein 2021), the 2020 United States presidential election was surrounded by a steady stream of prominent memes on social media platform *Twitter* using pop cultural references before and after Joe Biden was officially announced the 46th president of the United States. *Twitter* is used by over 180 million people daily world-wide[1] according to Statista (2021) – out of which about 70 million were Americans as of January 2021 – and is particularly a platform used by politicians and celebrities to engage with political issues. Thus, it stands to ask how and to what effect these memes engaged with political discourse concerning the events of the 2020 U.S. presidential election: Which events did they focus on and how did they frame them, i.e. "select, highlight or occlude" aspects of the election to "makes sense of an issue, topic or concept" (Bock 2020, 3)? Which stances and sentiments were expressed through the use of pop cultural references and how might this possibly distort perceptions of the events commented upon?

Through a thematic discourse analysis of the most popular memes related to the North American presidential elections on *Twitter* during the time frame from November 3rd to January 10th, I will demonstrate the increasing centrality of memes and popular culture to mainstream political discourse in the U.S. and the functions they served. With meme activity peaking during the day of the final vote count and after the inauguration, memes received higher interactions and visibility than before. References to works of popular culture were essential in framing the events of the election and establishing a narrative for certain publics. This article illustrates the increasing role of the topics and practices of fan culture in memes as well as the varied functions memes serve in political discourse such as providing a sense of community, agency in sense-making, and catharsis. At the same time, such blurring between "mainstream" and "fannish" discourse offers both new forms of political engagement that politicians can potentially instrumentalize and perpetuates trivialized and skewed representations of events – warranting a closer engagement with their growing impact.

2. Memes and Politics: A Brief Overview

The increasing use of memes in political discourse is not surprising: Since the early 2000s, memes have become more and more central to internet culture. As Limor Shifman points out, "memes have become prevalent modes of communication around

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[1]   Additionally, memes often find their way onto other platforms such as *Reddit*, *Facebook*, *Tumblr*, or *Whatsapp* in the form of screenshots or end up featured in news articles, allowing for an even wider spread of content.

the globe" (2019, 43) which hold "significant economic, social, and political pow-er" (47). Memes come in many shapes and hence have been defined differently since the concept was first introduced. In her 2014 monograph on *Memes in Digital Culture,* Shifman proposes that in its most recent iteration, a meme is best understood as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (41). While this is not a necessary condition, many memes take the form of "an incomplete, half-baked joke" that needs "the audience … to complete" it (Denisova 2019, 10–11) – for example, by using references to figures and narratives of popular and internet culture.

Memes have enjoyed widespread popularity in various formats and on various plat-forms. One of the most popular forms of memes that was widely used in 2020 election discourse is still the image macro, a picture that features a text overlay with "a set of stylistic rules for adding text to images" (Davison 2012, 127). These either "involve adding the same text to various images, and others involve adding different text to a common image" (Davison 2012, 127). Such image macros have been described by Lezandra Grundlingh as "essentially speech acts" (2018, 147) which require that the "context of the meme (the text and the image) must be interpreted within the context of the larger communication" (159). Understanding memes as a "form of non-verbal communication" (148), allows one to approach them as part of a larger discourse or as what Seiffert-Brockann, Diehl and Dobusch call "memetic discourse" (2017, 8).

While they might be perceived as trivial, memes have long been used towards polit-ical ends: they can be an effective method of exposing fans of popular culture to activist ideas (Hohenstein 2016, 19), function as "tools of digital rhetoric" in electoral contexts as well as "give voice to protest movements" (Penny 2020, 794) – such as for example the ACTA protests which similarly "relied on global online popular culture" (Nowak 2016, 191) or to express "critical views toward authoritarian regimes in non-western contexts" (Penney 2020, 794). Additionally, they offer a chance to engage young people as humor allows those "who wouldn't otherwise post about politics to share their views" (Vraga et al. 2015, 284). Huntington suggests that memes might work similarly to political enter-tainment by "influenc[ing] perceptions of and feelings toward political actors" (2017, 7).

On the other hand, memes can be deliberately designed to support radical politi-cal movements, as they, for example, "help[ed] [the Alt-right] recruit new members" (Woods and Hahner 2019, 95) by working as "'gateway drugs' to the more extreme elements of alt-right ideology" (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 36) as well as bringing fringe perspectives into the mainstream through "mimetic weaponizaton" (Peters and Allan 2021, 7). Memes have been widely used to normalize white supremacist ideas as the "line between playful (if antisocial) irony … and 'earnest' racism is difficult to differ-entiate", thus allowing for a plausible deniability of not actually espousing certain be-liefs (Milner 2013, 74) and often intentionally "[creating] a social backlash" (Woods and Hahner 2019, 104). Consequently, memes are a medium, the impact of which – positive as much as detrimental – needs to be critically questioned as its influence grows.

3. Memes and the US elections: From 2008 to 2020

Memes, specifically concerning American elections, have been steadily on the rise, becoming an undeniable part of the fundamental transformation of political discourse in the era of social media and participatory culture (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2018, 18). This has been noticeable in the U.S. since at least 2008, with Jens Seiffert-Brockmann, Trevor Diehl, and Leonhard Dobusch remarking that "Donald Trump was already visible in the alternative memetic discourse around the Obama Hope Meme back in 2008" (2018, 2876). Eight years later, "popular press discourse in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. election suggested that memes and related forms of Internet humor have now become powerful, even decisive, forces in contemporary political life" as Penney observes (2019, 792). The 2016 election was described by the *Washington Post* as the "most-memed election in U.S. history" ("How Bernie Sanders became the lord of 'dank memes'", Feb 23, 2016), with many attributing Trump's victory to a turning point in meme culture (Peters and Allan 2021, 7; Lamerichs et al. 2018, 182). Benita Heiskanen argues that in 2016 "meme-ing served as an example of a politico-cultural discourse that exemplified the unusual election" (2017, 4).

The 2020 election was certainly even more unusual and hence it is not surprising that memes became even more popular, with prominent posts receiving more likes and increased visibility. For example, in 2016, mainstream posts such as Hillary Clinton's messages to her voters on November 9th reached between 30k and 1,4 million likes (@HillaryClinton 2016), while most memes – such as one denying that parts of the US that predominantly voted for Donald Trump belonged to the U.S. – received up to 150k likes (@lucywickerdamn 2016). Most 2016 meme activity – which is also reflected in the scholarship – was concentrated before the election and much more fragmented, engaging for or against presidential candidates (e.g. Ross and Rivers 2017; Lamerichs et al 2018; Heiskanen 2017).

Memetic election posts received far more attention in 2020: while the number of registered users grew roughly by 11% from 318 to 353 million during this period (Dean 2021), the number of interactions grew disproportionally. Popular serious political posts, such as those made by Barack Obama (2020) still received up to 1,5 million likes – while popular memes received over 500k likes in some cases (@HamillHimself 2020), which is more than the most liked post by an official news outlet concerning the election (@CNN 2020 with 450k likes). What is even more notable was the sheer number of memes published overall. While it is difficult to measure how many were created, one can see that interest in and awareness of them grew, as search requests for "election memes" increased by 33% from 2016 to 2020 (see Fig.1), with additional interest in memes of politician Bernie Sanders peaking after the inauguration.

The immense popularity of memes during the 2020 election can thus not only be explained by an increase in registered *Twitter* users alone, but also has to be attributed to 2020 being a year unlike any other: Both rising political tensions and a pandemic led to a renewed interest in the outcome of the elections as well as an unusually high par-
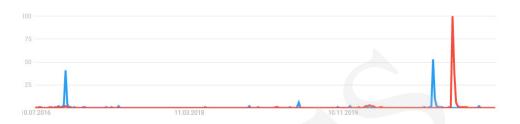
Fig. 1: Search results for "election memes" (blue) and "bernie memes" (red) on *Google Trends*, peaking November 2016 and November 2020 (blue) as well as January 2021 (red)

ticipation via social media. During the four years of the Trump administration, political tensions rose with hate crimes increasing (Koski and Bantley 2020) and particularly people of marginalized identities self-reporting "Trump-Related Distress" (Albright and Hurd 2020). Furthermore, a global pandemic forced millions of people to spend most of their year socially isolated in their own homes which "stimulate[d] citizens' social media activity, which shows in their prolific production of digital humour, commonly called 'memes', about COVID–19" (Dynel 2021) among other issues. For many U.S. citizens the question of who their next president would be seemed an issue of life or death. However, counting the ballots took particularly long, due to an – as explained by Stevens, Blanco, and Keating in the *Washington Post* – "unprecedented mix of mail, early and in-person voting" ("Where votes are still being counted", Nov 7, 2020) – which made users feel like "every day [they] wake up [a]nd it's still the election" (@MightBeLeslie 2020). It is thus not surprising that many turned to *Twitter* to share their anxieties before and celebrations after the decisive counts of the election, often in the form of memes.

4. Methodology

To understand how users employed memes to comment upon the election (and inauguration), I analyzed a selection of memes that were either highly popular themselves (as characterized by numbers of likes above 20k) or representative of popular themes. To create a corpus for an inductive thematic analysis, I searched *Twitter* for visual media uploaded during the election week that received more than 20k likes. Additionally, to account for memes with lesser "vertical" (i.e. high but narrow popularity of few viral images) but rather "horizontal" (i.e. many similar memes with few individual likes due to variations on a basic theme) popularity, I used my personal observations as a *Twitter* user of trending topics and posts related to the 2020 elections. Both methods face limitations: memes are often saved and re-uploaded by different users, meaning the same image could receive thousands of likes under different accounts, making numbers of

likes not entirely reliable. The second method is likely to be highly biased by one's own "bubble" of social interactions. Hence, meme collections by several news outlets were additionally taken into account which were found via Google News "election memes". This was followed up by close readings of memes (that were considered representative for prominent themes observed in clusters of memes) for content and function to analyze the "memetic discourse" for its use of references, framing of events, and expression of ideological stances.

Despite some limitations, clear patterns emerged: Memes were celebratory in tone of Biden's victory. Most memes commented upon significant events of the proceedings – such as the ballot counting results[2] and Trump's final press conference – using frameworks from popular culture by employing still frames and quotes from well-known franchises. A subset of these created multi-layered, highly intertextual memes, additionally borrowing pop cultural iconography well-known in meme culture. Others developed narratives around references to iconic moments and figures of the elections' week. One can also see the emergence of political figures – such as Putin and Sanders – being co-opted into popular culture as a comment. The different forms of memes fulfilled different functions which I will identify in the following sections.

5. "The Return of the Jedi": Framing Biden as a Heroic Winner through Pop Culture References

Many events of the election were framed using references to well-known moments of popular culture from large franchises such as *Star Wars,* the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* or *Game of Thrones*, illustrating the increasing role of popular culture as a shared language, even for political discourse, and confirming previously observed trends: Showing one's fandom by using famous quotes and references to important installments of sci-fi and fantasy franchises has not only lost its stigma but become "central to how culture operates" (Jenkins 2006, 1), having been mainstreamed to the degree that it is a requirement to participate in some discourses, particularly in online spaces.

Popular culture has become an important shared language to connect with one another on social media. In the anonymity of the Internet, having a shared language in the form of popular culture transcends national borders and other markers of identity, making this type of meme particularly apt to provide a sense of community in the anonymous and vast online world which might be more important than ever in a time characterized by isolation and anxieties. To those who recognize a beloved piece of media, Morimoto argues, such memes "signal through creation/ consumption of the

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2   Memes ridiculing the long counting process before the results were announced – although numerous and popular – are not described in this article as their function as an expression of anxiety is obvious.

meme that shared fandom literacy from which a sense of cultural kinship is born" (2018, 79). At the same time, such allusions, argues Tay, "allow users to produce commentary in a manner that ordinary people can relate to" (70).

Hence allusions to popular movies and TV shows form the base of many memes framing the weeks of the election week. Particularly references to such staples of geek fan culture as *Star Wars, Marvel,* and *Game of Thrones* were abundant, with even Mark Hamill, the actor playing *Star Wars'* Luke Skywalker, sharing a highly popular meme after the election that was liked 500k times:

Fig. 2: The titles of the original *Star Wars* trilogy imposed on the American presidents from 2008 to 2020 (@HamillHimself, 2020).

Most of these memes shared a celebratory, pro-Democrat tone and used pop cultural framing to depict Biden as the hero winning over the incarnation of evil in a given franchise. For example, another highly popular meme, liked over 550k times, featured a short video clip of characters from *Marvel's Cinematic Universe* with heads of political figures super-imposed. In this, Biden as patriotic superhero Captain America declares, "No one is going to take our democracy away from us," as he fights super-villain Trump with the help of an army of democratic politicians and mail-in ballots (@_gh0stn 2020). The political commentary is clear. Interestingly, such heroizations through memes were previously mostly described in alt-right and pro-Trump memes (e.g. Lamerichs et al. 2018, 197). While *Twitter* is generally left-leaning – according to one study, *Twitter* is "dominated by a moderate progressive majority" with over half of users falling into the "center left segment" (Alexander 2019) – popular memes sympathetic towards Trump were notably absent from this platform during the election.

What makes these memes so attractive to spread and go viral is that they require only a passing familiarity with these franchises, allowing large groups of people to

connect with the meme and each other. As Anastasia Denisova argues, it is the "the ability to connect the disconnected that makes memes a media and social phenomenon of our times" (2019, 11) and 2020 with its political polarization and pandemic isolation supported a strong need for connection. As Cohen has shown, meme virality is strongly correlated to recognizability (2019, 23). In the example given above, it is not even necessary to have seen the movies to associate the Jedi, for example, with good and Empire with evil: the color-coding of Trump in red – traditionally the color of villains and threats – and Biden in green clearly express support for Biden without requiring previous franchise knowledge.

With well-known franchises serving as the lowest common denominator of shared referentiality, this allows the audience to share an in-joke with a large group of people to comment on complex topics in an accessible manner, and to easily connect with strangers to feel a sense of community over an otherwise heavy topic such as elections, potentially alleviating feelings of anxiety and isolation during this fragmented and polarized time. Consequently, such framing might heighten political polarization by simplifying complex situations to a binary good vs. evil opposition.

6. Gritty wants Donald to know it was him or: Fragmented Publics, Agency, and Symbols of Unity

At the same time, a subset of memes using pop cultural frames went the opposite direction, being directed not at the largest possible spread but creating an in-joke only shared with an exclusive small circle. A number of memes employed intertextual references to more obscure aspects of popular or internet culture. Such memes only reached smaller numbers of likes in the 10k as they required a high degree of meme literacy. However, alternative versions were produced in higher quantities, demonstrating a selection pressure for high variability and an example of "horizontal" popularity. A common feature many of these memes shared was the use of specific iconography such as the NHL-mascot, "Gritty", popular in leftist Internet sub-culture, which was also remarked upon by many news outlets such as *Newsweek* ("Gritty Memes Explode After Philadelphia Appears to Hand Joe Biden the Election", Nov 6, 2020).

Gritty, the infamous mascot of Philadelphia's Flyers ice hockey team, has been an antifa symbol and a popular response to Donald Trump since the mascot's inception. The bright orange monster gained notoriety after its reveal in September 2018 and soon, due to its absurd design, became a beloved icon in meme culture. Early on, the leftist Jacobine magazine pronounced Gritty as a member of the working class, leading to the creation of many memes, especially in September 2018, featuring the hairy orange mascot as described by Horgan in *The Guardian* ("Liberté, Egalité, Gritté: how an NHL mascot became an antifa hero", 27 Nov 2018). Such memes tend to be oriented towards a "fragmented, narrow, and culturally-bound public" (Quinones Valdivia 2019, 99).

Fig. 3: Example of Gritty meme with high intertextuality by @IskraDavidPhoto (2020)

While the framing is similar to the previously discussed examples, in memes such as this[3], several elements come together to create the multi-layered joke of the meme: Gritty's head is super-imposed on Olenna Tyrell, a character from HBO's *Game of Thrones* series. The show's quote is slightly altered to refer to Donald Trump, once again taking the place of a hated villain, this time *Game of Thrones'* king Joffrey. Denisova (32) points out that "memes are coded messages and therefore can be confusing for various people: members of the audience may have varying abilities and skills to read the 'code'" in such cases. Here it is both necessary to know the context of the quotes – Olenna admitting to the murder of a tyrant king – and the event it references, with the implied metaphorical murder being Trump's loss of the election, which was attributed to the votes of leftist Philadelphians, as Pennsylvania flipping blue was seen as the key event cementing Biden's victory, metonymically referenced through Gritty.

While ultimately serving the same need to connect, such memes rely on strengthening the cohesion of a small rather than a larger group and the increasing role of ironic symbols to online movements. Sean Milligan suggests that "Gritty has been appropriated by the political left is, in some ways, similar to the ways Pepe" – the cartoon frog – "was appropriated by the alt-right" with both of them being "odd political icons that demonstrate the way zaniness has permeated online political discourse" (2019, 99). This, of course, creates political discourses that can only be understood by a small pub-

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3   Which also originated on Facebook and was then shared to many other platforms including protests in real life, see @ambiej (2020).

lic able to decode such symbolism and references. While it is outside the scope of this paper to determine who this small public was, Emily VanDerWerff suggested in *Vox* in 2018 that Gritty speaks particularly to "millennials' love of absurdist humor" and characterizes the "utter strangeness of life in 2018" – which only got even stranger in 2020. She muses that "Gritty looks like somebody who's realized that the world can't be saved without an earnest attempt to grapple with everything in it that's broken". In this vein, expressing their joy over Trump's defeat and love for Gritty in endless variations might offer users a way to take agency in a world that feels increasingly out of control, allowing them to express their frustrations in a language only understood by the like-minded.

7. Between a Dildo Store and a Crematorium: Event References, Delegitimization, and Cathartic Narratives

Another way Trump's loss of the election was celebrated in meme-format occurred in the form of event references, such as the slow vote counting in Nevada (e.g. Haylock 2020) or in response to Trump's final press conference. After it was announced that he would be giving a press conference not in the Four Seasons hotel but Four Seasons Total Landscaping parking lot, many memes were created that alluded to this event.

Fig. 4: A photograph of Trump's press conference, commented on by @ZackBornstein

These were seemingly more politically neutral in tone, yet clearly delegitimizing Trump by emphasizing the absurdity of the situation and highlighting the juxtaposition between the serious political event and the unintended location. To do so, many either

emphasized the parking lot's location next to "a dildo store and a crematorium", such as comedian Zack Bornstein did in Fig. 4, or by creating pop cultural variations on the theme of mistaking well-known locations. For example, when the *Star Trek* fleet holds a conference, not in the iconic starship, but in the "Enterprise… Rent-A-Car parking lot" (@StobiesGalaxy 2020). This gained such popularity that – as Gillian Friedman documented for *The New York Times* ("'Lawn and Order!' 'Make America rake again.' The (other) Four Seasons is selling merchandise", Nov. 9, 2020) – the store created merchandise for this occasion.

The sentiment expressed in these memes was to mock Trump's loss through delegitimization – a strategy common to U.S. electoral memes, as observed by Ross and Rivers in 2017. However, much research on memes during the last presidential elections focused on Trump and memes' contributions to his victory (Woods and Hahner 2019). Unlike in studies of earlier elections and other platforms concerning the 2016 election, all memes analyzed here were celebratory in tone concerning Trump's loss. Nevertheless, these displayed similar patterns in the opposite direction. As Lamerichs et al. point out in their analysis of 2016 memes concerning presidential candidates, many "had at least two aims: the defamation and ridiculing of political opponents and the glorification of the preferred politician, Donald Trump" (203). While their study focused mostly on alt-right circles, their observations of irony as a way "to discredit opponents" and framing of Trump as a "hero on display" while employing "intertextual references" (203) could, to a degree, similarly be observed in 2020 pro-Biden memes.

However, while previously observed delegitimizing discourse around candidates was usually circulated before elections, these event reference memes only arose afterwards. Hence, their primary function cannot be to politically influence. Rather, such memes provided a sense of catharsis through humor. A similar trend has been observed in memes referencing the Covid-19 pandemic. Douglas Ponton and Mark Mantello, for example, point to Covid-19 memes constructing incongruity via juxtaposition (2020, 50) to provide catharsis in a time of heightened anxiety, serving as "public and personal coping strategies, as well as cement social and cultural bonds through narratives of resilience" (45). Another study on Covid-19 memes by Lucía-Pilar Cancelas-Ouviña similarly suggested that they "helped release pressure and tension felt, and sometimes served to channel anger and rage in the face of the sense of powerlessness produced psychologically in a highly complex situation" (2020, 10).

This moment provided a perfect template for such a strategy, as it could be seen as a form of "poetic justice", with many users feeling like the incompetency behind this event characterized the previous years of the presidency. However, the high meme-ability of such allusions to a particularly memorable event may, ultimately, distort public memory due to its trivialization of a complex political situation to an irrelevant aspect of it[4].

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[4]   Side note: As of July 2021, this event is still fondly remembered by enough for a concert by punk band Against Me! At the Four Seasons Total Landscaping to sell out within 17 minutes (Sundholm 2021).

8. "What anybody going to tell me Putin is resigning, or did I have to learn it from this tweet about Destiel?": Fandom, Narratives, and Misinformation
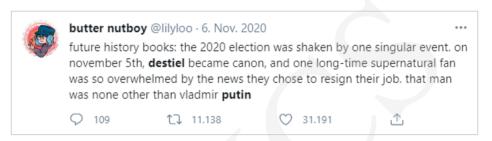

Fig. 5: Many users like @lilyloo connected the election, a pop cultural event and the presumed resignation of Putin in textual and visual memes

Additionally, the growing impact of fandom on political discourse could be observed – both in the collision of fan discourse with election news and the involvement of celebrities. Late November 5th and early November 6th saw two terms become world-wide trending topics for almost 24 hours during the tensest period of the election: "Destiel" and "Putin".

Due to a unique combination of events, the fandom of the CW's popular cult genre show, *Supernatural* (2005 – 2020), became an integral part in spreading misinformation about Russian president Vladimir Putin allegedly stepping down from his office. Popular tweets gained up to 31k likes (see fig.5). A long-awaited love declaration between two characters of the show, Dean and Castiel, whose relationship is abbreviated to "Destiel" in fan discourse, was aired at the same time as rumors about Putin's resignation arose. Fans combined the news in a wide variety of memes that first spread on *Tumblr*, a micro-blogging platform popular to fan communities. These proved popular enough that discussion of the memes spread to the more mainstream platform *Twitter* – however, not enough to gain a similar visibility as the previously described memes, with only fan-oriented news outlets picking up on it. Here, a line between fannish and mainstream political discourse is still upheld.

Besides its narrow public, this meme was also highly unusual as it was text-based. While text-based memes in general have received less scholarly attention, the created posts do fulfil the criteria given by Shifman, featuring a variation on a recurring pattern of figures and events: joking about a perceived causal relationship between "Destiel" and Putin resigning. To some degree, they could also be considered a "semi-meme": more of a simple shared joke, yet the resources of which lie in established memes.

These memes held a particular appeal as Putin had been implied to be gay in internet and meme culture for many years to make fun of him, often by mockingly alluding to a romantic relationship between the Russian president and the American president, Trump (Wiedlack 2020). Additionally, Putin also often features in alt-right memes,

although in heroic capacity (Lamerichs et al. 2018, 199). The *Supernatural* fandom's memes took to reclaiming these allegations and jokingly spun a narrative about Putin stepping down because of the same-sex love declaration between two fictional characters. While it is unlikely that fans believed in a causal relation, many were not aware they were sharing a rumor, not a fact.

This emphasizes the role of satisfying narratives for the spread of memes, particularly when combined with the delegitimization of unpopular political leaders. Consequently, references to larger narratives – such as pop cultural installments – help establish memes about political events as grand stories. While these jokes about Putin resigning because of a queer relationship on TV may seem very different from the event references ridiculing the Four Seasons parking lot press conference, both share the common feature of offering relief from the tensions of the elections by celebrating the "poetic justice"-like ends of unpopular leaders befitting to their shortcomings. While most people outside the fan community did not notice these memes, the fact that a large enough number of posts were created about this misinformation to be the number one trending topic rather than the actual election results, speaks for the potential fandoms have to impact political discourses by being disproportionally loud on social media.

9. "We are all Bernie today": Political Fandom and Floating Signifiers

Finally, election memes quickly seemed to die down once the new political status quo had been established. However, a new (and even higher) wave (cf. fig. 1) arose during the inauguration that would confirm Biden as the 46th president of the United States. The focus of these memes, however, was on U.S. senator, Bernie Sanders, who, despite popularity with young voters had not become the Democrat's presidential candidate in 2020, yet once again[5] gained meme fame through the "Bernie's Mittens meme". Such memes were shared in high numbers - some variations, such as a crocheted version of Sanders and his mittens gained almost 900k likes (@LilyBaileyUK 2021) – and even by many celebrities, such as actress Gillian Anderson. Celebrities' large fan bases added to the visibility of election memes (cf. also fig. 2).

It is of little surprise that users latched on to a picture of Sanders looking rather unenthusiastic about the inaugural proceedings. As *Twitter* user @DothTheDoth pointed out "We are all Bernie Sanders today", the joy of Biden's victory long replaced by many users feeling tired and powerless. Additionally, Sanders has become a celebrity with a parasocial following in internet circles and was already highly popular with meme fans since the 2016 electoral campaign (Winter 2020). As is already evidenced by users commonly referring to him as "Bernie", rather than Sanders, he has been popular with young progressive voters. Rachel Winter describes how he is commonly

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5   Earlier examples include „Bernie vs. Hillary", see Winter 2020.

Fig. 6: Celebrities such as actress Gillian Anderson contributed to election memes spreading, sharing variations of "Bernie's Mittens"

depicted as "'cool' and culturally informed both in memes and … fan writings" (2020) which are widely created and shared. This relatable image soon lost all political significance, becoming seemingly a floating signifier without clear meaning or reference. The iconic photograph of Bernie in his mittens was inserted into anything – from pop cultural imagery such as the Totoro meme[6] to the NASA rover landing – and reproduced in many media, be it deep faked video clips or as a crocheted doll.

It was not the political event that was central to the resonance of this image, but the "mood" it expressed – even more clearly than in the "Gritty" memes which still held a clear relationship to their political context that Shifman had argued for in 2014: "social function is emphasized in nonsensical memes" (47). This floating signifier-type template again allowed users to take agency in uncertain times through creating memetic variations, using a shared symbol inserted into personally significant narratives – espe-

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6   As Lori Morimoto explains, in this meme fans use the iconic Anime monster "Totoro at a bus stop from Hayao Miyazaki's 1988 film, Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro), to their own fannish ends, creating fan art that inserts favourite characters from other media into the scene in ways that often have a doubled semiotic resonance" (2018, 77).

cially if users have previously established a parasocial connection. While this might not yet translate to political power – after all, Sanders lost the primaries - its potential can also not be underestimated. As the lines between official political discourse and private meme discourse are increasingly blurring, some politicians adapt to the changing times and try to harness the significant power of meme culture. As *Newsweek* reports, Bernie cleverly instrumentalized his memetic fame and "rais[ed] $1.8M for Working Class in Need" with "Mitten's Merch [Selling] Out in 30 Mins" (Daniel Villarreal, Jan 27, 2021), demonstrating even more financial potential than the earlier Four Seasons memes.

10. Conclusion

As my examples have illustrated, memes, particularly those using pop cultural references, are becoming an increasingly relevant aspect of political discourse, moving from the fringes of internet culture into mainstream conversations on popular platforms such as *Twitter*, being further spread by news outlets and celebrities. Using the common language of popular culture to comment on and to frame political events, they enjoy popularity due to their ability to create community through shared intertextual references and humor. Particularly during the tense 2020 elections week, memes mocking Trump's loss and heroizing Biden enjoyed widespread popularity due to the cathartic effect of their narratives as well as providing community and agency during an anxiety-fueled time. The variety of memes observed demonstrates how different types of memes, drawing on different references, fulfil specific functions for different publics. As political actors are taking notice of these memes, they are likely to increasingly use them to their advantage, further blurring the previously existing "split between formal and informal ways of producing knowledge" (Heiskanen 2017, 51). The rise of these memes demonstrates the increased relevance of popular and fan culture to political discourse due to their ability to connect a world that is both growing increasingly more connected and increasingly fragmented on social media, yet also highlights the dangers of participatory culture to trivialize complex situations and spread misinformation.

Many open questions remain: what lasting impact will these memes have – both for future memetic discourse and public memory? Beyond the scope of a qualitative study is also the question of how much of political discourse occurred and occurs in the form of memes? Necessary to understand the relevance of different meme clusters is furthermore the question of how "horizontally" popular visual memes can best be collected and their popularity gauged? Additionally, as most meme scholarship, so far, has focused on left-wing activist or alt-right memes, yet the 2020 election was dominated by "casual" left-wing commentary, this type of memetic discourse is clearly in need of further research.

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